



Crime Prevention and Human Trafficking

Happy New Year and welcome to what we hope will be an exciting and busy year for ACCPA. We start the new year with a column prepared by *Karen McCrae* who is the Provincial Program Coordinator for ACT (Action Coalition on Human Trafficking) Alberta. We present this article to also draw attention to the fact that January is **National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention** month in the United States.

Even though slavery in Canada was abolished in 1833, human trafficking, sometimes referred to as “modern day slavery,” still thrives today. Globally, human trafficking is second only to drug trafficking as the most profitable illicit activity, and it is the fastest growing crime overall. However, unlike drug trafficking, human trafficking represents a grievous human rights violation. Unfortunately, Alberta is not immune to this crime. Human traffickers target the most vulnerable in our province, including individuals from Aboriginal communities, the child welfare system, runaway children, Temporary Foreign Workers, and newcomers to Canada. Human trafficking victims in our province are subjected to sexual exploitation and forced labour in agriculture, construction, processing plants, restaurants, the hospitality sector, and domestic servitude.

Attempting to confront this crime primarily after the fact using a criminal justice or “prosecution” approach has proven to be woefully inadequate. Human trafficking convictions are difficult to achieve in Canada and are often lenient at best, due in part to high evidentiary thresholds and a dearth of case law. Furthermore, the legislation surrounding human trafficking makes it difficult at times to distinguish this crime from other offences, which lays open further problems in convicting suspected traffickers.

Rather than focusing solely on punishing traffickers, we should direct our efforts at crime prevention and stop the crime from occurring in the first place. However, in order to do this we must gain a better understanding of the nature of human trafficking. This crime is currently alarmingly under-researched, with sparse information on what trafficking really looks like both globally and locally. Most of the relevant populations (such as traffickers, victims of trafficking, and middlemen) are “hidden populations” for whom no sampling frame exists and for whom the size and boundaries are unknown. It is difficult to find these shadow populations, and even more difficult to get them to share information with researchers.

Despite these challenges, the need for evidence informed research on human trafficking is urgent. Even though measures are currently being implemented to prevent this crime in Canada, without adequate and unbiased research there is no way to be certain that these measures will not have an adverse effect. For example, the Government of Canada has restricted visitors from certain countries (e.g., Romania and Bulgaria) from receiving visitor visas, with the stated expectation that this will reduce human trafficking from those countries. However, critics of this policy fear that this may force individuals who will not be dissuaded from attempting to come to Canada into the hands of human traffickers willing to exploit their vulnerable situation. Further research is urgently required to determine effective policies.

Available research has identified certain broad and overarching risks (among them poverty, social isolation, unrest in country of origin, weak social networks/community services, and being in the child welfare system). The so-called “root causes” tend to be systemic and difficult for any one organization to address on their own, and the wide array of vulnerable individuals further complicates determining and implementing simple crime prevention strategies.

Due to this, crime prevention measures can be quite controversial. This is an issue with no easy answers – root causes such as deep socioeconomic inequality or weak social networks are issues which have plagued our society for generations, and are unlikely to be (re)solved with a quick-fix solution.

One way to start is to increase resources and capacity for local law and border enforcement, RCMP offices, and community groups so that they are better equipped to identify and respond to human trafficking. Adequate crime prevention measures are only to be found in collaborative partnerships amongst community-based agencies, government, and law enforcement that span the divide between the local and national level. Only by working together in fruitful collaborative relationships can we provide an adequate response to a challenge that ignores community boundaries, economic divides, social distinctions, and borders of all kinds. Tackling the root causes of an issue so complex and multidimensional is impossible without assistance and support from all strata of society, from grassroots organizations to federal agencies. In order to buoy crime prevention efforts, underfunded and overworked social agencies must be given the resources they need to provide complex solutions to difficult problems in a collaborative way.

Crime prevention efforts are difficult and complex but critical if we are to adequately address and respond to the abhorrent human rights abuse and crime of human trafficking.